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SUBJECT: ELECTION SNAPSHOT: UNINFORMATIVE POLLS, URBAN
VIOLENCE, AND "NATIONAL IDENTITY" ISSUE ADD UNCERTAINTY TO
CAMPAIGN

REF: PARIS 1155 AND PREVIOUS

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Three weeks from the April 22 first-round of France's presidential election, center-right former Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy and Socialist Poitou-Charentes Region President Segolene Royal remain in the lead. Francois Bayrou, head of the centrist Union for French Democracy Party, remains within striking distance of the leaders in the latest polls, but has not renewed his mid-February to mid-March surge in poll numbers. Right-wing extremist Jean-Marie Le Pen is holding steady at under 15 percent of first-round voter intentions. The unreliability of French polling figures is as notorious as the unpredictability of French voters. An 8 percent increase in registered voters, resulting in the highest numbers since 1981, also makes election predictions hazardous -- and testifies to the importance of this election in voters' minds.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY CONT'D: The events of March 27 could change the candidates' standings, however, after groups of youths assailed police, set fires, and looted stores at the Paris train station that serves as the rail head for the city's poor, northern suburbs. This highly-publicized flare-up of urban violence immediately permeated election coverage and re-emphasized left-right differences on the linked issues of immigration, urban safety, law-and-order and national identity, with the Socialists generally on the defensive. To counter Sarkozy on these hot-button issues, Royal once again unsettled traditional leftists by encouraging supporters to proudly show the French flag and sing the national anthem (patriotic symbols not associated with the French left). After quitting his post as Interior Minister March 26, Sarkozy plunged into a well-planned, whirlwind schedule as a full-time presidential candidate, energetically defending his record as France's top law enforcement official and his vision of an activist state able to compel respect for law across all segments of society. Bayrou, for his part, continued his stolid fulminations against both left and right. END SUMMARY.

CURRENT STANDING OF THE THREE (OR FOUR?) LEADERS

13. (U) Though there will be twelve candidates on the ballot in the first round of France's presidential election April 22, only three, possibly four, of those candidates have any realistic chance of making it into the second-round run-off May 6. Former Interior Minister and President of the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party Nicolas Sarkozy is still

the first-round leader -- though by varying margins -- in all polls. Poitou-Charentes Region President and Socialist Party (PS) candidate Segolene Royal has solidified her second place standing, while centrist Union for French Democracy (UDF) leader Francois Bayrou, though no longer rising the polls as he did between mid-February and Mid-March, is also not falling significantly. Right wing extremist Jean-Marie Le Pen continues to be credited by all polls with more than 10 percent and less than 15 percent of first-round voter intentions. A poll of first-round voter intentions released March 29 and taken March 26 and 27 by the BVA polling organization credits Sarkozy with 28 percent, Royal with 27 percent, Bayrou with 20 percent and Le Pen with 13 percent of voters' support. The conventional wisdom remains that Sarkozy (1), Royal (2), Bayrou (3), Le Pen (4) is still the likeliest finishing order on the morning of April 23.

PREDICTIONS HAZARDOUS; POLLS UNINFORMATIVE

¶4. (U) That said, the conventional wisdom, when it comes to projecting what French voters will actually do on election day, is highly unreliable. French voters are notorious for a defiant streak that leads them often to vote against expectations. The conventional wisdom never projected that Le Pen might get into the second round of the 2002 presidential election, nor did it project that, in the 2005 referendum on the EU Constitution, the 'no' would win with a resounding majority. Adding to the uncertainty is the public's awareness that the upcoming election represents a watershed choice of direction for long overdue reform, even as voters' apprehension about the future, the volatility of their preferences and their mistrust of the political class remain at record highs. The net result is that any predictions about first round vote totals are hazardous; current polls may well be a very misleading guide to final

PARIS 00001283 002 OF 003

vote counts.

¶5. (SBU) The raw data gathered by pollsters in France is heavily adjusted, in different ways by the different polling organizations, to make it better reflect "the reality" of opinion. For example, respondents to polls are assumed to systematically under-report allegiance to Le Pen, so pollsters adjust -- sometimes by as much as doubling them -- Le Pen's numbers in the raw data. The percentages represented by these adjustments of course have to come from somewhere -- often in large part from Sarkozy's higher numbers in the raw data, under the assumption that respondents over-represent their allegiance to Sarkozy, but will in fact vote for Le Pen or some other candidate. The polls therefore only confirm what everybody already knows, that in the first round at least four-fifths of voters will vote for either Sarkozy, Royal, Bayrou or Le Pen. The exact proportions in which voters' will do so, however, remains highly uncertain, with some analysts predicting that Sarkozy and Royal will both finish with commanding leads over Bayrou and Le Pen, and others predicting that the four will finish within a half-dozen points of each other, all under 25 percent. Those who see the four continuing to converge, because Sarkozy and Royal remain unconvincing beyond their core partisans, do not dismiss the possibility of Bayrou (or even Le Pen) going to the second round against either Sarkozy or Royal.

COPS AND HOODLUMS -- PRISM FOR POLARIZING ISSUES

¶6. (SBU) Poll numbers are likely to change in the wake of the March 27 events at Paris' North train station. This flare-up of urban violence that pitted police against bands of youths that afternoon and evening brought about an immediate change in the dominant issues of the campaign. Until then, the first-round campaign had largely gravitated around the issues of purchasing power, generating jobs, education reform and protecting the environment. March 27th's reminder of the violence and destruction that ran

through France's immigrant suburbs in October and November of 2005, re-focused the public, the candidates and the media overnight on the complex of issues that the French confusedly subsume under the rubric "immigration."

17. (SBU) The "immigration" catch-all includes everything from the debate over immigration policy and the rights of the undocumented, to differences over what to do about unsafe streets in metropolitan areas and how to adapt the "national identity" to immigration-driven social diversity. It remains to be seen if these immigration, security and identity issues will remain dominant through the rest of the campaign. Further clashes between police and immigrant youths against backgrounds of fires and looting could easily marginalize most other issues in making up voters' minds.

18. (SBU) The events of March 27 have also had the effect of accentuating traditional left-right differences on immigration, security and "national identity" issues, polarizing the debate to the detriment of Bayrou's centrist message. Sarkozy, in his direct, energetic way, vigorously defended his vision of an activist, effective state that equally and sternly enforces the law throughout society for the benefit of the law-abiding, especially the law-abiding in poor, crime-ridden neighborhoods. In remarks to the press as he pursued a hectic schedule of campaign appearances, Sarkozy stressed that the individual, whose detention sparked the violence, was an undocumented immigrant with a criminal record caught riding without a ticket. To increase the pressure on the Socialists, he questioned if they were prepared to defend free-loaders on the system. Royal identified the aggressive policing tactics associated with Sarkozy as being part of the problem, and decried the tension and mistrust that characterizes relations between police and immigrant youth. She also made clear that she did not defend the individual whose detention set off the incident, stressing that users of public transport should of course pay for their tickets.

19. (SBU) Bayrou, for his part, lambasted both left and right, and used the issue to make the case for the futility of polarizing policies, and therefore the necessity of his centrist, best-of-both alternative. Sounding exactly like Royal and the Socialists, Bayrou denounced Sarkozy for

PARIS 00001283 003 OF 003

having "chosen repression" while, sounding exactly like Sarkozy and French conservatives, he simultaneously denounced "the left's legacy of laxism." Credibility on law-and-order issues has always been Sarkozy's strong suit, and it seems that the renewed salience of these security issues will work to solidify support for Sarkozy, unless his detractors are more successful in portraying his approach as part of the problem.

ROYAL ADDS PATRIOTISM TO HER VISION OF CENTER-LEFT

10. (SBU) Royal had earlier in the week -- again -- unsettled traditional leftists and many old-line PS party leaders by encouraging her supporters (and all French citizens) to proudly show the flag, and by ending her rallies with all present singing the French national anthem. The "tri-color" and the "Marseillaise" are patriotic symbols closely associated with the French right, not the French left. In appropriating these symbols and giving them a prominent place in her campaign, Royal recognized how social values throughout French society have been, in recent years, trending toward the traditional and conservative. The number of voters who identify themselves as "of the left" is smaller than ever, and Royal is well aware that a second-round victory for her depends on winning the support of a range of centrist voters. Whether or not this appropriation of patriotic symbols, associated with the French right, presages further, substantive moves by Royal to the center, away from the PS's traditional policy prescriptions remains to be seen. Royal's appropriation of these national symbols was also

intended to counter Sarkozy's popular proposal for the establishment of a Ministry of Immigration and National Identity (ref).

RECORD NUMBER OF REGISTERED VOTERS

¶11. (SBU) Also this week the Interior Ministry released the final voter registration figures for the upcoming election. Never have so many Frenchmen and women registered to vote. Almost 44.5 million citizens are registered to vote in the upcoming presidential and legislative elections, an increase of almost 8 percent over the number of registered voters in the last presidential election (2002), and the highest registration rate since the watershed presidential election of 1981. While significant registration increases are common in the years preceding an election, there has been an exceptional surge in voter registration among young people, including in immigrant suburban neighborhoods.

COMMENT

¶12. (SBU) There is unprecedented public interest in the upcoming election, and there are an unprecedentedly large number of voters registered to participate in it. Apprehension, volatility and mistrust characterize the electorate, and a large portion of voters remain undecided. Which two of the leading candidates will come out on top in the first round is still very uncertain. How the candidates perform in the final weeks -- and how deftly they react to unforeseen developments like the flare-up of unrest -- will be critical to their final vote totals. End Summary. Please visit Paris' Classified Website at:
<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/eur/paris/index.cfm>

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